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ABSTRACT

Site-based management (SBM) is an increasingly popular approach to school restructuring. SBM aims to transfer authority from state agencies and school districts to committees based at schools. To garner a consensus supporting reform, these committees are to be representative of educational and community members. SBM plans are characterized by: (1) a governing body comprised of administrators, teachers, parents, and occasionally students; (2) a downward distribution of authority toward each system stakeholder; (3) a clearly articulated understanding of the scope of decision-making powers linked to desired outcomes; (4) the concept of shared accountability; (5) professional development; and (6) a plan for generating school district support and encouraging widespread participation. Research from the corporate sector suggests that participatory decision making promotes system responsiveness. Important questions remain concerning SBM's idiosyncratic and undesirable effects, its insensitivity to standard accountability measures, its ability to genuinely transform structures, and the necessary degree of specificity in designing guidelines for devolving authority. The consequences of decentralization on student performance remain unknown. An honest evaluation of policy effects is needed to reliably estimate the desirability of SBM. (TEJ)

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Site-Based Management: An Experiment in Governance

Lisa Carlos and Mary Amsler

In recent years educators have been rethinking many assumptions about how schools should be designed to facilitate learning. Of particular concern is school governance, and an increasingly popular approach to restructuring governance is site-based management (SBM).

SBM aims to *decentralize decision-making* by transferring authority from state education agencies and school district offices to units such as governance councils, committees or teams located at the school. The principle behind SBM is participatory democracy: these smaller governing bodies are seen as representing a wide cross-section of educators and community members, i.e., stakeholders at the school level, who should help determine policies that directly affect them. Theoretically, greater participation in decision-making helps build consensus for certain reforms and helps ensure that the changes reflect the expertise of those directly involved in teaching and learning.

According to some analysts, the movement toward SBM is not new but dates back several decades (Wohlstetter and Odden, 1992). Others view the phenomenon as an outgrowth of the educational reform movement of the past 10 years. Murphy (1990), for example, argues that when top-down mandates of the first wave of reforms in the 1980s proved limited, a second wave developed with an emphasis on overhauling the education system by empowering those at the bottom. Educators began to examine corporate experiments such as "high-involvement management" and "worker participation" and adapted these approaches for use in schools. Increasingly, both urban and rural schools began to embrace SBM—even though little is known about how to make it work effectively.

This *Brief* will discuss the basic components of SBM models, research on the effectiveness of SBM policies and key questions in the debate. It will also describe SBM activities in the FWL region.

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Characteristics of Site-Based Management Plans

Governance Structure. The central feature of any SBM plan is the school's basic governance structure. At some schools, one governing committee suffices. At others, decision-making occurs in several subdivided units or working groups, with final decisions made at the full committee level or through an executive committee.

SBM Council Membership. A typical SBM governance body represents a wide spectrum of interests. Most commonly, membership includes administrative and teaching school staff, community members and parents. High school governance bodies may include students. Members' qualifications and their proportional representation may be mandated from above. Membership may come from an open election process or a select few nominated representatives. Nominations may be made by administrators, parents or community members at the district or school level.

Locus of Authority. A key factor in determining whether SBM will be a symbolic gesture or a genuine redistribution of power is where the locus of authority lies among stakeholders in the system (SEDL, 1990). In some cases, a school-site governance body may have a purely advisory role; decisions made are subject to veto by the principal, superintendent and/or school board. In other cases, all school-site governance members may have equal decision-making authority; decisions are made by consensus with no one person having veto authority.

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Decision-making Jurisdiction. In addition to identifying *who* has ultimate authority, an SBM program needs to specify *which types of decisions* fall within the jurisdiction of the governance body. For example, a state or district may want to specify a school's authority to make decisions in the following areas: program design (including needs assessment and evaluation), curriculum, staff development, and, less often, personnel and budget. Usually, a district or state can yield authority in these areas, though federal laws may limit the degree of decision-making authority schools may exercise. One way to maximize school-site decision-making power is to provide blanket or rule-by-rule waivers that exempt SBM schools from regulatory constraints.

Focus on Learning Outcomes. *Many maintain that the ultimate purpose of SBM is to maximize students' academic performance* (SEDL, 1990). With such a focus, attention is diverted from issues of power and control to ones centered on improving learning. But others argue that concerns such as building teacher morale or developing a more coherent school culture deserve equal emphasis, since they also will benefit students. Regardless of SBM's final goal, it is generally agreed that a vision or mission that is directly linked to student outcomes should be formulated before the SBM process begins.

Accountability/Evaluation Mechanisms. Implicit in SBM is the concept of *shared accountability*: those who share authority in deciding a school's operations also share *responsibility* for its fate. To monitor the effectiveness of a SBM school, baseline data should be collected and used to measure progress towards improved performance. What is important is that SBM schools develop performance standards that reflect their unique circumstances along with already adapted state and/or district standards. A process for continued self-evaluation also should be developed to determine how effectively the school is meeting its goals and utilizing its resources.

Professional Development at the School Site. SBM requires principals and teachers to redefine roles and realign responsibilities. The principal acts as a facilitator, not a dictator, in the shared decision-making process. Teacher roles expand to include new managerial, leadership, and problem solving responsibilities. Staff need to acquire technical expertise in new areas, such as budget, personnel, and regulatory concerns. A strong professional development component must be designed to allow for the meeting time, inservice training days, and resources to pay substitutes during planning and decision-making meetings.

Role of Parents and Community Members. Parents, too, become participants in decision-making, providing valuable insight about how the schooling process can be improved to better educate their children. Since this process may be new to some, it is strongly suggested that parents be given training to acquire group decision-making skills. To ensure a cross-section of interests, a state or district may want to specify some parent-background characteristics. They may also want to specify what proportion of the governing body's membership should be parents, since the larger the proportion of parents, the greater their influence. *Researchers note that if parents and community members are to be truly empowered, real authority must be delegated to them.* (Malen et al., 1989).

District Support. Although SBM is considered a school-based initiative, school districts and boards play an integral role in its success. When district administrators support SBM, their roles switch from demanding compliance to providing support. Districts can even provide the initial groundwork and impetus for SBM by establishing a district-level SBM planning team of representatives from all schools. This district-wide team can identify common goals/outcomes as well as decision-making parameters among participating SBM schools. Local school board members should be involved in these discussions. Early agreement on who has decision making authority will help to ensure that a school's decisions are not overturned at a later date.

Incentives for Participation. Besides incentive funding and waivers from certain district and state regulations, another possible motivation for participation is a merit pay structure. Teachers who assume added governance responsibility could receive a commensurate increase in salary or some type of bonus. Some even argue that staff at the school district and school site level should have comparable salary schedules. This helps curtail the tendency for better teachers and principals to seek promotion to district administrative positions.

Lessons from the Corporate Sector

Many supporters of SBM have been influenced by a body of corporate research indicating that participatory decision-making creates a more effective, responsive organization. SBM in education is analogous to private companies' movement away from hierarchical organizational structures to ones with less rigid lines of authority where workers participate more actively in decisions concerning productivity

and company policies. Wohlstetter and Mohrman (1993), in their study of private sector decentralization, suggest that participatory management is most appropriate in organizations where the environment is changing rapidly; the work is complex, involves uncertainty and is performed in teams: an apt description of many schools. They propose *four areas where control needs to be decentralized*:

- **power** over decisions that directly influence organizational practices and policies;
- **knowledge** — technical and managerial — that allows those working directly with students to better provide services;
- **information** about how well the organization is faring (specifically performance, revenue and expenditure data); and
- **rewards** that are based on the performance of the entire organization as well as the contributions of individuals.

They argue that if decentralization does not occur simultaneously in all four areas, the schools' ability to make effective decisions, fully implement reforms, and be more responsive to changing student needs will be seriously hampered.

Key Questions in the Debate

Does Site-Based Management Create Better Schools? Despite years of experimentation, many researchers agree that *SBM's potential is largely unrealized. Many questions about its merits remain unanswered.* On the one hand, SBM has been called a catalyst that has created new decision-making processes, bolstered teachers' morale, and provided teachers and school staff more opportunities to assume leadership roles. On the other hand, its processes can be extremely time consuming, somewhat contentious, and limited in effect on student performance.

Questions surround SBM's ability to trigger the systemic transformation of schools' decision-making processes. In the most limited forms of SBM, governance bodies are merely advisory; school administrators consult with teachers on issues of curriculum and instruction. When SBM is most expansive, governance bodies are granted real decision-making power by states and district officials. School-site council members have equal authority (i.e., decisions are made by consensus, with no one maintaining veto power) and decision-making jurisdiction is broad, covering every aspect of school policy and operations.

This degree of decentralized authority is seldom attained, however, and there is little evidence to support the notion that SBM fundamentally alters power relationships in the school system. If authority is transferred, the process is usually piecemeal. For example, a school may be given budget authority but not the ability to hire and fire staff until later. Many school staff also lack the expertise and skills necessary to carry out their new roles. Teachers may assume more management responsibilities while lacking the expertise in navigating a complex sea of budget, personnel and policy matters. Meanwhile school administrators, asked to support or facilitate, lack requisite negotiation and consensus-building skills.

Finally, there is little evidence to prove that greater decision-making autonomy results in better student performance. Some SBM research suggests that the decision-making process initially tends to bog down in trivial decisions on day-to-day operations instead of focusing on the more complex decisions concerning what it is students need to learn. Governing councils get mired in power conflicts and forget to link their decision-making efforts to improving student performance. Research indicates that even when councils focus on teaching and learning issues, the decisions tend to center on less difficult ones such as text book choices. This is in contrast to more complicated issues such as the redesign of the school's curricula.

In response to these concerns, supporters contend that the problems lie not in the concept but in the implementation process. Their suggestions for improvement include guidelines that clearly describe how decision-making authority will be transferred to school staff; adequate funding support; ongoing technical assistance; and enough time for the reform to take effect.

Could Site-Based Management Be Stronger in Combination With the Other Reforms of Choice and Deregulation? SBM coupled with other mechanisms such as choice provisions and/or regulatory waivers could further propel systemic change.

Although SBM is supposed to promote school responsiveness to differing student needs by allowing teachers and parents to influence decisions, choice advocates say this is not enough to be effective. SBM must be coupled with student and parent empowerment to choose among schools. Only then is a competitive context created where SBM schools make decisions that have real consequences: schools that make better decisions will flourish and schools that make poor decisions will be forced to improve.

Supporters of deregulation further add that schools need regulatory flexibility. Many argue that giving schools the go-ahead but not the flexibility for site-based decision-making is an empty gesture. The problem occurs when schools are granted the ability to create new forms of governance but not full authority to carry out decisions. Without this authority, schools will be unable to experiment with new practices. Essentially, the freer a school is to carry out its own mission, the more likely there will be a true departure from past practice (SEDL, 1990).

Will SBM Produce Schools that Lack a Common Thread or Basis for Comparison? Critics fear that allowing each school to redesign itself will mean losing all commonality. Without common denominators in instruction, curriculum, and organizational structure, comparisons for accountability would be difficult (Raywid 1990). A lack of commonality could also create problems for the increasing numbers of students who change schools frequently throughout the year. Many supporters believe encouraging differences among schools will actually increase opportunities for creating varied models of effective schooling. They welcome the variety that SBM schools could provide.

How Specific Should Provisions Establishing a State SBM Program Be? Some say that SBM legislation should specifically mandate the level of decision-making authority given to school site participants. The legislation should clearly state whether the state, district or school has the final word over personnel, budget, staff development and curriculum issues. Site participants are then more likely to trust that their participation will really influence policy. The law may also want to specify how members will be elected to school governing bodies, what kinds of backgrounds they should have, and the length of their tenure. This level of specificity will allow policymakers to more precisely evaluate the program's effectiveness.

Others argue that a state-legislated SBM program that leaves room for interpretation has certain political advantages. A program that leaves discretion about the design and delegation of authority in the hands of local school districts is more palatable to those who support maintaining the status quo.

Experiments in SBM

Across the country, urban and in increasing numbers, rural districts are beginning to experiment with different forms of site-based management. Kentucky, for example, has mandated SBM councils in all its schools by 1994. Researchers are just beginning to study what some of the implementation issues may be. Probably the most highly publicized program at the present time is the one created under the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. Its framers believed that school-based decision-making would provide the needed flexibility for school improvement planning and raise expectations among students and staff that they could make change happen. Considered radical, the program left budget, personnel (including the ability to hire and fire the principal) and school program planning authority in the hands of a local school council consisting of six parents, two community members, and two teachers. Analysts are as yet unwilling to declare this bold experiment a success but observe that with ensuing conflict, it has brought a new arrangement of power to the city's school system [Epps, 1992].

In the FWL Region

Arizona. Several bills designed to decentralize education radically were introduced in the 1993 legislative session. Initially, HB 2125, a comprehensive education reform bill, proposed interdistrict and intradistrict choice, the repeal of nearly all statutes related to education, and establishment of school councils, not school boards, as the primary decision-making entity. Generally, all funding (minus five percent allocated for central office personnel) and decisions regarding accountability, curriculum, and personnel were to be given directly to school councils who in turn could decide how much power, if any, would be transferred back to the district and/or board.

In addition, this bill would have authorized the establishment of 25 charter schools throughout the state free from all regulations except certain federal, state, and local requirements pertaining to health, civil rights, and accountability. Potential charter school organizers could have sought sponsorship from any local governing board, county school superintendent's office, or state board of education.

The decentralization portions of this bill were controversial in that many organized groups fought against giving that much power to school personnel, especially without adequate training provisions. An amendment was introduced which would have required districts to develop a decentralization plan with input from various stakeholders and which contained training funds. The schools would have been guaranteed only decision-making power over curriculum, with other areas of authority as determined through the district plan. Charter school provisions were modified to allow only local school boards to charter

schools within their district, with no appeal process.

Both the initial bill and amendments were defeated, though legislators expressed hope that an education reform package will pass in the 1994 session.

California. Since the late 1970s California has experimented with different forms of site-based management. Back then programs, such as the Early Childhood Education (ECE) and School Improvement Program (SIP), fostered decentralization by allowing schools more authority over program design and spending. SIP also required the creation of school site councils which prescribed the ratio of teachers, parents and community members. In the early 1980s, the School Based Coordination Act furthered these efforts by allowing more regulatory flexibility to schools who wished to coordinate instructional programs.

Today, the state has continued to encourage both decentralization and deregulated through the SB1274 (1990) and the Charter Schools (1992) initiatives. SB1274 created a comprehensive restructuring program to encourage schools to implement alternative models of SBM governance. The Charter Schools legislation allowed for the creation of 100 schools by charter giving them the option to waive state regulations and district policies concerning governance.

Nevada. During the 1993 legislative session, two bills on SBM have been introduced. Senate Bill 91 would allow certain schools in the state to design programs for which district policies and most state requirements would be waived. The bill, currently in committee, defines the composition and authority of school councils, and provides specific guidelines for creating SBM programs. Critics argue that the bill would create too much variability among schools and would stifle current SBM projects operated by the districts. Supporters dismiss such concerns by noting that if SBM schools fail to produce better outcomes, they will revert to the traditional system. (The bill in its present form has a provision that holds schools accountable for meeting certain outcome measures. If the school has not shown improvement after two years, control reverts to the school board or county.)

A second bill, AB 290, also presently in committee, proposes an SBM pilot program of 10 schools throughout the state. A $20,000 appropriation ($2,000 per school) would permit the pilot schools to develop site-based councils and evaluate their effectiveness. Supporters say that such a pilot would allow experimentation without the potential for loss of accountability.

Utah. The 1993 State Legislature enacted into law House Bill 100, the Centennial Schools program. Beginning July 1, 1993, up to 200 Centennial Schools, chosen through a competitive grant process, will receive a base allocation of $5000, plus $20 per student based on 1992-93 daily membership. Schools can also add monies appropriated under the Minimum School Program, the Educational Technology Initiative and Career Ladders to their Centennial budget.

The cornerstone of the program is site-based empowerment. Participating schools must appoint a board of directors composed of teachers, classified employees, parents, community leaders and other citizens who will be responsible for making site decisions. Local boards of education would delegate real authority to these site councils. The bill also emphasizes school participation in other reform areas, including: 1) interagency collaboration between the school, health and human services, the court and other agencies; 2) increased family involvement through the design of individual student educational-occupational plans; 3) development of active school and community/business partnerships earning opportunities for students; and 4) an integrated curriculum emphasizing real work problems, a self-paced, competency-based evaluation system and the redistribution of teacher time.

Conclusion

The different types of state initiatives described in this *Brief* illustrate the varied approaches to site-based management. What is clear from the experiences so far is that there is no one right prescription that can be readily adopted for every situation. Site-based management structures will assume varied forms to adapt to the specific circumstances of a school, district or state. And that is exactly what some would argue is the main objective of SBM: to promote innovative approaches to governing, tailored to the unique needs of the school community.

It is also true that SBM is not an isolated experiment in governance. It is part of other policy movements to increase school autonomy, such as deregulation and choice. Supporters of deregulation, for example, argue that rule-by-rule or blanket waivers as well as the consolidation of categorical programs into less restrictive blocks also will contribute to this desired school-site flexibility by removing many of the obstacles to local decision-making. Supporters of choice underscore these views by arguing that only when parents and students have the freedom to choose will schools be encouraged to undertake fundamental change.

At the same time, educators' efforts to decentralize are being further fueled by a parallel movement in the corporate sector. Proponents of corporate restructuring argue that an increasingly complex environment demands unencumbered organizations streamlined to adapt quickly to new knowledge and technologies. Supporters of SBM view decentralized decision-making as integral to the creation of more flexible schools.

In the midst of this experimentation, certain questions remain unanswered. Will increased autonomy encouraged by decentralized governance lead to less accountability at the school site? Will increased autonomy through deregulation leave children with special needs once again ignored or sidelined in the learning arena? Will increased autonomy through choice policies weaken rather than strengthen the public school system? Finally, what impact will all these movements have on improved student performance?

Policymakers and educators need to be able to both embrace these experiments and at the same time continue to carefully evaluate which combination of policies encourage genuine change and which ones contribute little to the improvement of schools.

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